

Pope, Russian Orthodox patriarch to meet in historic step

VATICAN CITY (AP) — Pope Francis and the leader of the Russian Orthodox Church will meet in Cuba next week in a historic step to heal the 1,000-year-old schism that divided Christianity between East and West, both churches announced Friday.

The Feb. 12 meeting between Francis and Patriarch Kirill will be the first ever between the leaders of the Catholic Church and the Russian Orthodox Churches, which is the largest in Orthodoxy.

Francis is due to travel to Mexico Feb. 12-18. He will stop in Cuba on the way and meet with Kirill on Feb. 12 at the Havana airport, where they will speak privately for about two hours and then sign a joint declaration, the Vatican said.



"This event has extraordinary importance in the path of ecumenical relations and dialogue among

Christian confessions," said the Vatican spokesman, the Rev. Federico Lombardi.

The two churches split during the Great Schism of 1054 and have remained estranged over a host of issues, including the primacy of the pope and Russian Orthodox accusations that the Catholic Church is poaching converts in former Soviet lands.

Those tensions have prevented previous popes from ever meeting with the Russian patriarch, even though the Vatican has long insisted that it was merely ministering to tiny Catholic communities in largely Orthodox lands.

The persecution of Christians — Catholic and Orthodox — in the Middle East and Africa, however, has had the effect of bringing the two churches closer together. Both the Vatican and the Orthodox Church have been outspoken in denouncing attacks on Christians and the destruction of Christian monuments, particularly in Syria.

In November 2014, Francis had said he had told Kirill: "I'll go wherever you want. You call me and I'll go." Kirill will be in Cuba on an official visit, his first to Latin America as patriarch.

The meeting, which was announced jointly at the Vatican and in Moscow, marks a major development in the Vatican's long effort to bridge the divisions in Christianity.

In the joint statement, the two churches said the meeting "will mark an important stage in relations between the two churches. The Holy See and the Moscow Patriarchate hope that it will also be a sign of hope for all people of good will. They invite all Christians to pray fervently for God to bless this meeting, that it may bear good fruits."

Metropolitan Illarion, foreign policy chief of the Russian Orthodox Church, told reporters on Friday that there are still core disagreements between the Holy See and the Russian Church, in particular on various Orthodox churches in western Ukraine.

The conflict centers on the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, the country's second-largest church, which follows eastern church rites but answers to the Holy See. The Russian Orthodox Church has considered western Ukraine its traditional territory and has resented papal influence there.

"Despite the existing ecclesiastical obstacles, a decision has been taken to hold a meeting between Patriarch Kirill and Pope Francis," he said.

"The situation in the Middle East, in northern and central Africa and in other regions where extremists are perpetrating a genocide of Christians requires immediate action and an even closer cooperation between Christian churches," Illarion said. "In this tragic situation, we need to put aside internal disagreements and pool efforts to save Christianity in the regions where it is subject to most severe persecution."

The Vatican has long nurtured ties with the Istanbul-based Ecumenical Patriarch, Bartholomew I, who is considered "first among equals" within the Orthodox Church. Starting with Pope Paul VI, various popes have called upon the Ecumenical Patriarch in hopes of bridging closer ties with the Orthodox

faithful.

But the Russian Orthodox Church, which is the largest church in Orthodoxy and the most powerful, has always kept its distance from Rome. Joint theological commissions have met over the years and the Russian church's foreign minister has made periodic visits to Rome, but a pope-patriarch meeting has never been possible until now.

The location of the meeting is significant. It has long been assumed that a "neutral" third country would be selected for any pope-patriarch encounter, but it had always been assumed that it would be somewhere in Europe.

Francis, however, played a crucial role in ending the half-century Cold War estrangement between the United States and Cuba. That the onetime Soviet outpost in the Caribbean will now play a role in helping heal the 1,000-year schism between the Catholic and Russian Orthodox churches is a remarkable feat of geopolitical and ecumenical choreography that may have the dual effect of thrusting President Raoul Castro into the spotlight, given that he will greet the pope upon his arrival and preside over the signing of the joint declaration.

The Vatican spokesman, the Rev. Federico Lombardi, noted that Cuba is both well-known to the Russian Church as well as the Catholic Church, given that three different popes have traveled to the island in the span of 20 years.

"It's a place that positioned itself well for the circumstances," Lombardi said.

About two-thirds of the world's Orthodox Christians belong to the Russian Orthodox Church, or about 200 million, Lombardi said. The Catholic Church claims about 1.2 billion faithful.

About 75 percent of Russia's 144 million people call themselves Russian Orthodox, according to the latest polls, although only a fraction of them say they are observant.

Under Francis, the Vatican has encouraged continuing ecumenical ties with the Orthodox as well as other Christian denominations. And it has gone out of its way to be solicitous to Russia, especially in shying away from directly criticizing Moscow over its role in the Ukraine conflict.

Ever since Kirill took the helm of the Russian Orthodox Church in 2009, the church has enjoyed increasingly close ties with the Kremlin that critics have dismissed as the de-facto merging of the state and the church.

Daily Mail - Nataliya Vasilyeva contributed from Moscow.

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